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**Yes to CAFTA: Trade Accord Will Help U.S. Get Right With Its Soul**

By Aileen Josephs, Immigration attorney, Palm Beach County

As an immigration attorney reporting from the field, I can tell you that the amount of human suffering among the undocumented people in the United States is very great. I also can tell you that no matter how many fences we build to protect our borders, as long as extreme poverty continues to exist south of the border, people will use their creativity and risk their lives and limbs to enter our homeland.

A friend of mine, who is a reporter for a Spanish-language TV newsmagazine show, called me in tears three months ago after she returned from Chiapas, Mexico. She interviewed a Mexican woman, Dona Olga, who has made it her mission to care for Central Americans who are so badly hurt when jumping on freight trains to reach the U.S.-Mexican border that the doctors in the ill-equipped hospital in Tapachula simply amputate their mangled limbs.

These human beings then are left in the streets of Chiapas, where Ms. Olga cares for them at her home with homemade herbal ointments.

This story has not made it into U.S. mainstream news. It seems that Americans do not know about the despair that drives people to risk everything to make it to "El Norte." Illegal immigration is not healthy for the U.S. not only because of our war against terrorism but, most important, because of our national soul. We should not exploit undocumented workers, nor should we allow countries south of our borders to base their economies on the exportation of their people to lands where they are not welcome. What has been missing in the immigration discourse are constructive steps to address the source for migration.

Our engagement today is critical with Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, countries ravaged by civil wars in which right-wing governments backed by the CIA took on with complete impunity communist guerrillas in the 1980s. The war wounds are healing and infrastructure for democracies is being laid, yet the damage has left countless street children who, after decades in poverty, have turned to violent crime. Gang violence is pervasive and troubling when these nascent democracies are struggling to become pluralistic, open societies.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's recent trip to Latin America symbolizes a realization that we must begin initiatives to deal with the new political and social realities emerging in Latin America. The Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) is one of the tools we can use to bring the fruits of democracy to the region, once labor and environmental issues are addressed carefully.

Trade is vital for long-term economic growth. CAFTA will give an important boost for those emerging democracies, but much more will have to accompany trade. CAFTA will begin to change the landscape only if accompanied by aggressive aid and development initiatives that can be undertaken with the help of nongovernmental organizations.

Development assistance, coupled with trade, is necessary to tackle the problems of poverty that are persistent in Latin America and which cause great concern to the stability of democracies in the Western Hemisphere. Rep. Robert Menendez, D-N.J., with great vision, introduced HR 3447 to establish a "Social Investment Fund for the Americas" to be administered by the U.S. Agency for International Development. About 220 million people in the region live in poverty; 59 million live on less than a dollar a day. Free trade by itself will not end the rampant destitution and marginalization.

Once we engage with our Central American partners, with both free trade and aid for sustainable and equitable development, the leaders and elites of these countries must make it their mission to provide optimal conditions for their citizens.

The people in Central America must begin to see change. They need to see hospitals and schools and to have potable water. The marginalized should not have to go to "El Norte" and risk their lives in order to send money to pay for their tin roofs and cement floors. Americans must also see change. Virulent anti-immigrant rhetoric and protectionist stances against free trade and aid for needed development are not acceptable policy positions.

The annual Organization of American States General Assembly, which took place June 5-7 in Fort Lauderdale, could not be more important for creating a new vision. U.S. Ambassador to the OAS John Maisto correctly said he intended to discuss "delivering the benefits of democracy" to countries throughout the hemisphere.

In her book, *Incantations*, Ambar Past, who has spent 30 years with the poor and illiterate Mayan women in Chiapas, collected some of their poems. After an epidemic swept a village in San Cristobal de las Casas, Ms. Past wrote of seeing a woman carrying her dead baby on a board and wrapped in a shawl for burial. "The mother offered her dead child a last sip of Coca-Cola and uttered a prayer: Take this sweet dew from Earth, take this honey. It will help you on your way."

CAFTA will provide the U.S. economy access to the second-largest export market in Latin America after Mexico. Yet this time, along with trade, we have to concentrate on aid and social development so an indigenous child can live past the age of 5 and not die from a curable disease while his poor mother gives him sweet Coca-Cola to sip before burial.

We must engage. Not doing anything is no longer an option, since human despair always will drive people to cross borders — at all costs and by unimaginable means.